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ABSTRACT

An instructor uses a class activity to increase student understanding of the implications of sexual harassment in interpersonal relationships. Students read a dialogue inspired by a newspaper report about the disciplinary action against five senior government officials at the Atlanta Veterans Affairs Medical Center who had participated in repeated acts of sexual harassment. After hearing a lecture on dysfunctional relationships and interpersonal communication, students form small groups and work on identifying behaviors that could be described as sexual in nature, unreasonable, severe or pervasive, and unwelcome and offensive. Student reaction to this learning activity is highly positive. Course evaluations and unsolicited comments suggest both male and female students appear to derive a greater understanding of and appreciation for others from the designed sexual harassment exercise. (Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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Confronting Sexual Harassment.

by Carl L. Thameling

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CS 510 277

Confronting Sexual Harassment

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Goal: To increase student understanding of the implications of sexual harassment in interpersonal relationships.

Sexual harassment is a social phenomenon well documented in the media, in journals, and in textbooks. DeVito (1995) stated that "sexual harassment is not a single act but rather a series of communicative acts that come to characterize a relationship; therefore, it is useful to place sexual harassment in the context of dysfunctional relationships" (p. 406). Sexual harassment has been defined by scholars, attorneys, and government agencies as unwelcome conduct that is sexual and offensive in nature, which creates an intimidating and hostile work environment. Civil Rights Acts (1964) have made sexual harassment illegal and made harassment victims eligible to collect damages (EEOC, 1993). Often sexual harassment policies emerge as the result of lawsuits filed by sexually harassed female and male employees against their employers rather than by proactive initiatives inspired by management (McAllister, 1993, p. 31).

To increase student understanding of sexual harassment and its implications for interpersonal relationships, I use dialogue inspired by a newspaper report (McAllister, 1993) about the disciplinary action against five senior government officials at the Atlanta Veterans Affairs Medical Center who had participated in repeated acts of sexual harassment. Although most of the dialogue is fictional, for illustrative purposes, I use actual phrases from the 1993 article. The dialogue is framed and presented to students.

Step 1: The dialogue listed below is given to students to take home two class sessions before it is to be analyzed in class.

Step 2: On the day I lecture on dysfunctional relationships and interpersonal communication (DeVito, 1995), I ask the students to form groups.

Step 3: Then, I direct student groups to follow the instructions that accompany the learning activity and to discuss the dialogue listed below for about fifteen minutes.

Step 4: A fourth feature of this exercise is my personal visit to one or two groups to participate in the discussion and observe. At this point of the learning activity, four or five student discussion groups are working independently toward the goal outlined in the instructions of the following exercise.

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

(An Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Learning Activity)

Instructions: The fictional dialogue listed below follows a documented criminal investigation that took place in a Veteran's Affairs Office in Atlanta. Read the dialogue and analyze it by identifying those verbal and nonverbal behaviors that could be described as:

1. Sexual in nature-for example, sexual advances, showing pornographic pictures, telling jokes that evolve around sex, comments on anatomy,

2. Unreasonable-for example, behavior that a reasonable person would object to,

3. Severe or pervasive-for example, physical molestation or creating an intimidating environment, and

4. Unwelcome and offensive-for example, behavior that you let others know offends you and that you want stopped (DeVito, 1995, p. 406).

Group consensus needs to be reached before a behavior is labeled as sexual harassment. The group's selected spokesperson will be expected to offer support for the group's decisions.

Case: Sexual Harassment at the VA Hospital

Employees involved in the episodes of sexual harassment are:

Jill Hyde: An new employee in Research & Development.

Brad Turner: Associate research director in the rehabilitation research center at the hospital for four years; and Jill's boss.

Situation: It is Jill's first day at work, and it is her first interaction with her male supervisor. The episode takes place in the present.

01 B: "Oh, look. Oh, good. We've got another member of the itty bitty titty club."

02 J: (shocked) "I beg your pardon? Did I hear you right?"

03 B: "Well, let's not get our panties in a wad on the first day."

04 J: (again, unable to believe what she has heard) "Excuse me? Are you for real."

05 B: "Yes, I'm for real....read the signature on your paycheck if you are here long enough to receive one."

06 J: (numbed by Brad's comment) "You will have to forgive me, but I don't know how to take your words."

07 B: "Word, words, words. What's a few words. You'll just have to learn not to take me so seriously when I make such comments. Shall we get to work?"

08 J: (uneasy and confused Jill slowly turns her thoughts to Brad's question) "Yes, I suppose so." (Jill pauses for a moment to collect her thoughts). I'm interested in getting started on some research with patients with mobility problems."

09 B: "Well, you won't have any problem with subjects. We have a hospital full of patients (a weak but serious attempt at humor). They're all dying to get a walk-on part in the play, "Life Without Limbs." Let me show you your office and research center."

10 J: (Trying to be a good sport Jill laughs a little) "Ha, ha, ha. I like your lighter side. And yes, show me my office and research center. I've seen it before, but I could use an escort."

11 B: "I'm your man. Excuse me (Brad smiles). I would be delighted to accompany you to your office."

Step 5: The fifth stage of this exercise involves discussion sessions. I ask the students the following debriefing questions:

If you were Jill, how would you have responded to Brad's behavior?

Assuming Brad were your boss, co-worker, or friend, and you are male, what would you do about Brad's behavior?

Yes, this dialogue is fictional, but what is real about it?

How does the fact that Jill and Brad are literally strangers fit into dysfunctional relationships?

What features (actions, words, context) of the present exercise seem unbelievable to you?

What gender is often accused of sexual harassment? Are the complaints justified?

Legitimate?

Were the four behaviors used to analyze the fictional dialogue useful? Confusing? Confining? In what ways?

Appraisal

Student reaction to this learning activity is highly positive. Course evaluations and unsolicited comments suggest both male and female students appear to derive a greater understanding and appreciation for others from the designed sexual harassment exercise. During the debriefing segment spontaneous student exchanges emerge; students often want to discuss their male and female perceptions concerning sexual harassment. Students, in many instances, discuss who's to blame in sexual harassment instances (e.g., Women? Men? Society? The context? Double messages often depicted in literature and movies? Attitudes toward women? Is it futile to blame anyone?)

While these questions are different than the ones I ask above, they are relevant. Student interaction is often lively, insightful, and apparently, enjoyable to the students who participate in the discussion.

This learning activity has extended usefulness. For instance, instructors can use the dialogue to discuss effective and pseudo-methods of conflict resolution, such as, avoidance, force, and manipulation. The dialogue also aids in discussing effective communicator characteristics, appropriate and inappropriate self disclosure, status differences among males and females, and perception. Therefore, the present sexual harassment dialogue has the potential to help illustrate, explain, interpret, and discuss several interpersonal communication theories and concepts.

Readings

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